

# Questions about the Biblical Canon

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Just how we ended up with the Old and New Testaments as we have them today is an interesting tale, but one that most of us know little or nothing about.

Most people are aware that Catholic editions of the Bible include sections (in fact whole books such as 1 & 2 Maccabees) not found in standard Protestant versions. Fewer are aware that the Eastern Orthodox churches include even more material in their scriptures (such as 3 Maccabees and the Prayer of Manasseh). So, what about that extra material? Or more to the point, why does the 66-book edition most of us are familiar with not include it, and who decides what is and isn't scripture?

Traditionally, evangelical Christians have circled their wagons around the distinction between genuine writings and "apocrypha". Genuine writings being, of course, their 66-book Bible; apocrypha (sometimes called *pseudepigrapha*) conveniently being everything else. Evangelicals have been quick to assert, for example, an "obvious qualitative difference" between the two. Unfortunately there is an obvious qualitative difference between books *within* the Bible as well, as anyone will know who has compared the *Gospel of John* with the *Book of Numbers*.

## The Creation of the Old Testament Canon

But wasn't the whole thing decided at the very start of the Christian Church? Here's where things get interesting. The Jewish canon (Tanak/Old Testament) first reached its present form some time after 70 CE, and is traditionally associated with a gathering of rabbis (under the direction of Rabbi Akiba) at Jamnia (Jabneh), 24 km south of modern Tel Aviv.

*Until then, apparently, the status of the Song of Songs and of Koheleth (Ecclesiastes) remained doubtful, but at Jamnia they were definitely included in the canon.*

*[S]ome of the [other writings] (including apparently Daniel) were still in dispute until the assembly at Jamnia. After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE and the rise of the Christian movement, the Jewish community felt obliged, in closing ranks, to fix the limits of its Bible more precisely. So it was that certain books occasionally included were excluded and that others previously challenged were included.*<sup>1</sup>

Notice the date; this is several decades *after* the establishment of the church. Paul has left the scene and the events related in Acts are already history. Notice too that this was a Jewish initiative. There was no Christian input into the process at all. In fact Jamnia was a response from emerging post-temple Judaism to its troublesome Christian offspring.

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<sup>1</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan. *Whose Bible Is It? A History of the Scriptures through the Ages*. (New York, Viking, 2005), 45-46.

It is not surprising then that the Christians rejected this new Jewish canon, and continued to use the Septuagint, a Greek version of the Old Testament produced in Alexandria beginning in the third century BCE. The Septuagint (LXX) included several books and additional passages which the rabbis had rejected, and are no longer found in the standard Protestant editions today. In part their decision was based on the fact that there were no Hebrew originals for this additional material. Ironically, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls demonstrated that the rabbis were, in part, mistaken. The book of *Ecclesiasticus* (Wisdom of Sirach) has been partly recovered in a Hebrew original.

Christianity, however, was to continue to use the Septuagint based "Alexandrian Canon" for another thousand years! Some modification was required because of disputes over variant readings, and the scholar Jerome was responsible for giving priority to the Hebrew text used by the rabbis, a factor that has obscured the nature of the text familiar to first generation Christians.

*There can be little doubt that the Qumran form of Isaiah is the one presupposed by the New Testament... The Qumran Isaiah describes an anointed one who has been transfigured, suffers, and then sees the light, presumably of the glory of God. Compare this with Luke's account of the walk to Emmaus. The risen Lord joins the disciples and rebukes them for not believing the prophecies. 'O foolish men and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken. Was it not necessary that the anointed one should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' (Lk. 24.25-6). There is nothing in the MT of the prophets which describes a suffering Messiah who sees the glory of God, so the story in Luke presupposes the Qumran version of Isaiah.<sup>2</sup>*

## **What about the New Testament?**

The New Testament canon was a matter of debate for centuries. It first reached its present form as late as 367 CE when Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, compiled a list of recognized books which agrees with the ones we now have. Three hundred years is a long time by anyone's reckoning. If the writing of the New Testament documents had started back in 1840, we wouldn't get to see the final product until the year 2140! Although it seems hard to imagine, during this 300 year period Christians of all persuasions pursued their faith without the benefit of the Bible as we know it today.

As for the gospels, it took till 185 CE for a consensus to emerge about which were the authoritative ones, and only then thanks to a pronouncement on the subject by Irenaeus of Lyon. For another 200 years these four gospels were to put together with a variety of different additional documents according to the best judgments of different Christian communities. As late as 200 CE the Church at Rome still didn't consider the books of Hebrews, James, 1 Peter or 2 Peter as scripture.

In the end the final selection was to be a narrow thing, with the popular *Shepherd of Hermas* missing a listing in Athanasius' canon by a whisker, while the controversial books of Revelation (previously accepted in the West but rejected in the East) and Hebrews (accepted in the East but rejected in the West) squeaked through. One important criteria used in the selection was that the documents should come from the

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret Barker. *Text and Context*. 6

pens of those with first hand knowledge of the events surrounding the creation of the church. We now know that Athanasius made several wrong calls. For example, several of the letters attributed to Paul (such as the so-called Pastoral epistles to Timothy and Titus) are in fact later documents.

And one has to wonder also, how Christians who vehemently reject Catholic tradition and authority in all other matters, can be so dogmatic in their agreement with this particular tradition. The events surrounding the creation of our New Testament can give little support to those adhering to a strict Biblicist view.

### **The Book of Enoch**

An interesting example of a book that has drifted in and out of favor is *1 Enoch*. It was regarded as scripture in many parts of the early church, and is quoted in the New Testament book of Jude (v.14-15). In the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (which claims 36 million members!) it still forms part of their Old Testament canon. It was read and quoted by early church fathers Clement and Origen, and was particularly valued by the Essenes. It's even referred to in the New Testament (Jude 14-15.)

Enoch contains material about the origin of evil and the final judgment, and provides details of the cohabitation between the "sons of God" and the "daughters of men" mentioned in Genesis 6. Originally written in Aramaic, the oldest complete surviving text is in *Ge'ez*, an ancient Ethiopian language, though fragments of the Aramaic original have been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

So is *1 Enoch* canonical? The author of Jude apparently thought so. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and many of the earliest generation of Christians agreed. Yet it was never included in the Septuagint, and therefore never became part of the mainstream Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant canons.

### **The Reformation**

The reformation brought about a huge shake up when Martin Luther, citing the precedent of Jerome, banished the Septuagint canon and replaced it with the shorter Jewish canon. The additional books, said Luther, were good to read but not to be considered as scripture.

It is this edited canon of the Old Testament that is now in almost universal use, and is regarded as authoritative amongst traditions as diverse as Southern Baptists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists.

How then can one make sense of statements like the following from a religious group that uncritically uses the Protestant canon?

*We... believe that we are **commanded** by God to get back to the original Christianity of Jesus and the apostles. We are deeply committed to*

*“Restoring Apostolic Christianity” – living by the first century Christianity of the early Church of God, which was later subverted by false teachers.*<sup>3</sup>

Such claims (in this case from leader of the *Living Church of God*), seem to be made in complete ignorance of the fact that their Old Testament canon is far from "apostolic".

Few Christians realize that Luther's bold redrawing of the boundaries of scripture almost flowed through into the New Testament as well. The reformer had labelled the Letter of James "an epistle of straw", and Lutheran editions of the Bible initially followed through by relegating it, along with Hebrews, Jude and Revelation, to a special appendix at the back of the New Testament. In effect this placed them in a de facto New Testament apocrypha. Apparently Luther, who coined the very phrase *sola scriptura*, meant something different by it than modern "confessional" Lutherans (those belonging to the highly rigid Missouri Synod for example) and other fundamentalists.

However, the practice failed to catch on (although it persisted through a number of editions of Luther's New Testament, and was even adopted in the first edition of Tyndale's English version). The precedent is a fascinating one. It demonstrates that the original Protestant tradition could, during its formative years, happily make major adjustments to the canon of scripture, using reason and judgment based on the best scholarship available at the time.

### **Canon? Which Canon?**

Much more could be added. For example:

- Writing around 300 CE Eusebius, the historian of the early church, listed Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, Jude and Revelation as either dubious or false.
- The Syrian Orthodox tradition (Syriac canon) continues to reject 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, Jude and Revelation.
- The Muratorian canon (perhaps as early as 170 CE) includes *The Wisdom of Solomon* and *The Revelation of Peter*.
- Codex Sinaiticus, the oldest complete New Testament manuscript that has come down to us (fourth century CE) includes *Barnabas* and *The Shepherd of Hermas*.
- As late as the fifth century the Codex Alexandrinus included 1 & 2 Clement.

To complicate matters even further, modern scholars have identified two new gospels that may cast authentic light on the church's earliest beginnings. One is the reconstructed "Q" Gospel that underlies Matthew and Luke. The majority of New Testament scholars believe that this Sayings Gospel was reworked by the later writers to fit in with the brief narrative framework created by Mark, as they sought to flesh out the scanty factual material available to them about Jesus. It comes as a huge shock to most Christians to learn that the authorship of these later documents (Matthew and Luke) is pseudonymous.

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<sup>3</sup> Roderick C. Meredith. What We Stand For. *Tomorrow's World*, July-August 2005, 2.

The second document is the *Gospel of Thomas*, one of the Nag Hammadi texts rediscovered in Egypt in 1945. This gospel includes some passages with close parallels to canonical material, but also some entirely new sayings of Jesus that circulated in the early church. Much of this material is believed to be at least as old as the gospels of Mark and "Q".

The canon of the Bible, then, did not drop out of the heavens one day, fully formed and divided tidily into proof texts. A basic knowledge of the process of canonization ensures that any concept of inerrancy is untenable; a weakness of those who have (to quote Luther) "swallowed the Holy Spirit feathers and all".

Even today, there is clearly no single Christian canon of scripture, and in fact there never has been.

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